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ABSTRACT

Lasting appreciation of literature does not just naturally issue out of basic reading skill training, because the outcomes desired in basic reading skills and in literary appreciation are different. Therefore, the materials used in each must be different. The language adapted for skill building exercises is different from that used in stories, poems, plays, and biographies. The teacher needs to show the students the elements that comprise good literature. Literacy vocabulary should be taught as it clarifies and intensifies for children the potentialities for enjoyment in literature. A wide array of literature should be provided in order to accommodate the interests of different children. Individual responses should be encouraged by the teacher. Children should be encouraged to discern what happens in a piece of literature, how it happens, and why it happens. The writer's motives in his choice of words, structure, plot development, images, and rhyme and rhythm (in poetry) should be discussed and analyzed. (LL)

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WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO CHILDREN'S LITERATURE?

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November, 1971

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Over twenty-five years ago W. W. Charters, said, "Reading is the keystone of the arch of intelligence that the schools have been established to construct. Place the mastery of reading on one pan of the balance and all the other subjects of the curriculum on the other, and the others will hit the beam. Strip the curriculum to its bare essentials and three R's do not remain. There is only this one supreme essential R, the ability to read." But, Charters, distinguished scholar though he was, was wrong then and he is even more wrong now. In our culture even twenty-five years ago reading was no longer so central a medium of communication. Today it is even less so. The fact of the matter is that television, the motion picture, radio, film strip, recording, computer, the whole range of technological devices for communication have assumed more and more responsibilities. In our schools even twenty-five years ago, reading was no longer so dominant a medium for learning. Today it is even less so. The fact of the matter is that the new mass media are much more prominent in our classrooms. I would expect in the years ahead, both in the larger culture and in the schools, this trend would continue. I would expect that all the media, including the printed word, would occupy increasingly parallel positions and not major and minor places.

But in order not to destroy my life work, let me hasten to add that reading will continue to have important uses in meeting the problems that face our society and in teaching our children. Let me describe the two

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principal uses of reading: the literary and the expository. It is an important distinction and explains much of what has happened to children's literature. In the aesthetic uses of language, reading provides a creative outlet unparalleled in the newer mass media. In a very real sense television, the motion picture, radio and the rest impose a ready-made particularized view of people, places and things. It is not yours to create the voice, the gesture, the change of countenance which your own sensibilities insist accord most truly with the spirit of the writing. No, you must submit to the insistent projections of the media but every man is his own artist when he reads and, if he will, he can listen once, twice, or a hundred times to those nuances of language which captivate his imagination. More than that, he can project what he will each time in a different way until it satisfies him perfectly, and he can practice his art where he will. In the bus, in the airplane, in the living room, in the backyard he need disturb no one. He can fight a good fight or charm a beautiful woman -- no one need ever know.

The literary uses of language have a long history. Over the centuries reading has captured the enduring concerns of people: to love and to be loved, to find the sense of at-homeness in the universe, to develop values about what is good and true and lasting, to know what serves mankind well and what sows suspicion, distrust, and hatred, to discover tasks larger than themselves which can command their devoted energies all life long. Reading has captured all these and placed them in perspective, heightened awareness, sensitized mind and spirit. Reading is always <u>there</u>, patiently waiting to serve with a lasting record of what men have thought and dreamed and felt about what has been, about what is, and, most important, about what might be. When reading

is devoted to the literary uses of language it emphasizes allusion in communication, the connotative property of words and sentences. These properties function in fiction, drama, poetry, biography, and the rest of literature. The emphasis is not on literal meaning but on tone and pitch, on emotion and empathetic response.

But of course there is another use to which language can be put. That other use is the expository. In teaching language as exposition, clarity in communication, the denotative property of words and sentences is of prime importance. These properties function in most fields of learning: social studies, science, mathematics.

Historically the use of language to which most direct instruction has been directed has been the literary. College teaching of language, including reading, has largely been through literature. High school teaching has followed suit; elementary school instruction has also been in this tradition.

Yet most fields of learning depend heavily on the expository uses of language. In exposition the words are chosen for precision in meaning. The ideal choice is that word to which sender and receiver can lend identity in meaning. Mathematics exemplifies this ideal best of all the fields of learning. In a mathematical term or statement little if any ambiguity can be tolerated. The sentences in which words are employed in exposition are all logically patterned. Social studies, science, mathematics, all employ the same logical patterns: deduction, induction, analogy.

On the other hand, the literary uses of language rarely heed logical order. Indeed as a witness to human conduct, literature may portray deliberate violations of any kind of reasoning. Since emotional impact is sought,

feeling responses in literature, as in painting, music or any other fine art, escape the tidy rubrics of logic. Many literary effects are not stated at all but only suggested. In a poem for example each reader must sketch in his own imagination a response which the literature only implies.

Exposition denies this kind of freedom to the reader. The reader is not allowed to supply his own data if the logic is less than comprehensive. Indeed he must be sensitive to those gaps in logic as inadequacies when they occur. The reader cannot indulge in individualistic imaginative elaboration. He is required to be an objective reporter, making in his own mind an image for which the communication attempts to supply precise detail. Clearly these two uses of language, the literary and the expository, cannot prosper in the instructional program of the elementary school unless sharply differentiated.

Now what has all this to do with children's literature? What has happened to children's literature in the elementary school? We are just beginning to have a program in children's literature in the elementary school. Why are we so slow to mount a well-defined program in children's literature? We have been slow because the distinction between expository and literary uses of language has been ignored. For note what we employ in basic reading instruction in the elementary school. We employ almost exclusively literary-type materials. Yet we teach these literary-type materials as if they were expository pieces. We heavily emphasize the literal. Why? It is because we want our basic reading program to be indeed basic. That is, we want the skills to transfer to the whole of the curriculum. Most of the curriculum, as we have said, is invested in expository uses of language,

so we are driven to teach the material in the basic reading program as exposition. We use skill practice materials, whether commercially prepared or teacher prepared, to emphasize expository type answers. We ask, "Who did it?", we ask, "What happened?", we ask, "Where did it happen?". These "Who", "What", "Where" questions are important in exposition. They fall far short of the kinds of responses which are critical to individual imaginative response in literature. Actually, while we acknowledge these responses as important to exposition, even in exposition they represent only a beginning. Far more important in exposition are the kinds of questions which get at the organization of ideas and the application of ideas. Yet in basic reading instruction we cannot move on to these more important kinds of responses for exposition because we have settled on the wrong medium.

Stories do not lend themselves well to logical analysis for organization of idea or application of idea. For example, one of the skills we have long listed in basic reading instruction has been reading for main ideas. If these were expository pieces, we could read for main ideas. We could read for main ideas within paragraphs. We could read for main ideas within longer pieces of connected discourse. But stories are not developed that way. You cannot read for main ideas as if a story were primarily exposition. Look at the paragraphs in stories. Most of them are very short. And they are not primarily devoted to explaining. Most of them, indeed, represent a dialogue carrying on the movement of the story. Look at the story as a whole. It does not primarily represent the logical development of ideas or the application of ideas. What we are teaching when we say we are reading for main ideas in story materials is, in fact, simply reading for main events.

A main event is a happening arranged primarily under considerations of aesthetic impact. A main idea is a theory or a process arranged primarily under considerations of logical development. We cannot teach reading for main ideas by reading for main events. So while the basic reading instruction is called "basic", (That is, it is supposed to teach competences sufficient for all of the curriculum.) in fact, it is basic only in a limited sense.. Take the transfer between basic reading skill and reading in mathematics. Transfer is very weak indeed, even though we try to disguise the weakness of the transfer by calling verbal problems in mathematics "story" problems. These problems are no stories, as a child quickly discovers when he tries to apply basic reading skills to logical processes embedded in a mathematical problem.

So that is the great task in reading instruction remaining for us. The task is to build the reading competence demanded within each separate subject. We have assumed that we need not provide added instruction to make possible good reading in literature. in social studies, in science, or in mathematics. We now see that each subject has a separate vocabulary, a separate manner of statement, a separate structure. Our first reaction has been to provide brief units on how to read literature, or social studies, or science, or mathematics. Now it is clear that this is only a temporary measure, helpful but still clearly only a temporary measure. From the beginning no one can teach reading effectively in any subject except within the substance of that subject. Young readers learn to read in any subject as they are taught to manage the concepts, ideas, attitudes, appreciations, skills native to that subject. So it is with literature. We must have a planned program and teach children the reading competences which will result in lasting appreciation.

My first point is then: lasting appreciation does not just naturally issue out of basic reading skill training. We cannot use the same materials which are used for basic skill development. The outcomes desired in basic reading skills and in literary appreciation are simply different. The materials must be different. We cannot adapt material to serve for exercises in basic reading skill building and provide for solid growth in the enjoyment of literature at the same time. We need stories, poems, plays, biographies chosen because they are literature, not adapted for linguistic calisthenics. Literature should be read as it was written. We need to show all the fullness of vocabulary, all the variety of which the English sentence is capable. We simply do not get that kind of language when material is adapted for skill building exercises.

Second, we need to show in the teaching of literature what makes a good story, a fine poem, an exciting biography, a stirring play. We can use from the beginning the vocabulary of literary discussion. Children are not afraid, are not mystified by terms like "conflict", "suspense", "climax". It is the same literary vocabulary used at all levels -- high school, college, and beyond. Literary vocabulary is neither difficult or unduly extensive and it brings security and focus to children in building appreciation of literature. Of course, we try not to be stuffy or pedantic, we don't dissect, we don't grill the hapless innocents; we simply show what the potentialities for enjoyment in literature are. We name the names of literary elements because that clarifies and intensifies for children the potentialities of literature. We go beyond the hard-won skills taught in basic reading instruction to those competences which permit children to enjoy thoroughly the content of literature.

Third, we need a secure place for children's literature in the curriculum. Without an established place in the curriculum the program in literature is quite aimless. Choices of selections are left to chance. Cumulative building of taste and judgment are impossible. Now it is one thing to argue about which methodology of instruction is more appropriate to a literature program. It is quite another to leave the content for instruction amphorous and random. Of course the planning must not be so coercive that it prevents children from ranging widely in their own reading. The planning should include teaching pieces which exemplify the kind of literary satisfaction being taught. Then a wide array of alternative pieces should be made immediately available for the children's own further independent reading. We are all well aware that the longer we keep making all the choices the better we teach ourselves and the less children learn.

With that qualification we can sketch what such a program in literature might entail. First, we would recognize that literature is an art form. We do not want 29 identical sketches in teaching art, we do not want 29 identical images in teaching literature. What we do want in our teaching is the encouragement of individual, creative, imaginative responses in each child. We want to help each child make out of his own being, his own thinking, his own feeling, indeed his own reading, responses that are unqiuely his. He joins imaginatively with the writer and together they make new artistry.

How do we go about getting these kinds of responses in reading literature? We encourage the young reader to take a different attitude toward words than during the early language code practice. In language code practice we teach children to learn <u>what</u> the word means. But to paraphrase

John Ciardi, in literary reading we want the child to learn how a word means. There are two facades in learning how a word means. One facade is applied by the writer. How did he call upon his literary craftsmanship through words? The other facade belongs to the individual reader. How do these choices of the writer call upon the reader to respond in his imagination? First, we look at word choices from the point of view of the writer. How did he wish the words to mean? Did he wish the words to mean through their sound or through their rhythm or through their imagery? Then we look at the word choices from the point of view of the individual reader. How did the words actually speak to the individual imagination? If it is a sounding word, how did each reader hear those sounds in his mind's ear? Were they rough and abrasive or were they smooth and soothing? Were the words one of those which sizzle, crackle, or pop? If the words were rhythmic choices, how did the words actually tap out the rhythm for each child? Were the rhythms marshal, lilting, rapid and stirring, slow and calming? If the words were image making choices, how did they affect the individual reader? Did the words make him see the green and serried hills? Did they let him listen to the crash of surf along the shore? Did they lend him the smell of the forest after the rain? Did they give him the touch of wood under a craftsman's hand? Did they make him feel the pull of streams against a boatsman's paddle? How did the words mean to the individual child?

What we are suggesting then is that the first step in differentiating literary reading from ordinary basic reading resides in responses to words. In literature it is much more than what a word means that makes the impact. It is how a word means that speaks to the individual imagination.

In literary reading we also want to take time to savor the literary artistry behind word choices. Why were these words chosen by the writer? Perhaps it is obvious that the writer had to use a sounding word but there are many sounding words. Why this choice? Perhaps it is obvious the writer wanted to use a word with a rhymthic beat. But why this word? Perhaps it is obvious he wanted to suggest imagery. But why did he fasten on this particular image-making choice? So when we teach the reading of literature we encourage each child to have his own creative response. We want to make it clear in the way we warm to the children's individual imagining that each is his own artist as he reads. Out of what each lives, knows, feels and cares about comes a response that only he can make.

Now let us take two literary forms, stories and poems, and suggest the ways in which literary responses might be fostered. First, let us take stories. And let us illustrate with just two aspects of stories: plot and character. Again the literary responses may be thought of as developing through three levels. If it's plot, first what are the principal events. Then, second, how did the writer wish these events to contribute to the movement of the story and how did the individual child respond to these choices? And, third, why; why were these choices made by the writer and why did the child respond to them, as in fact he did respond?

The present emphases in reading instruction insure for most children that the first level of response will be rapidly achieved. The children quickly discern what the events are and in what order they follow. So let us proceed to the appreciative response levels -- the how's and the why's. With plot, the second level invites the reader to see how the events were communicated. We encourage each child to go beyond just naming what happened to creating

in his imagination how it happened. This privilege of individual imaginative elaboration is basic to the appreciation of literature. An author selects and orders and heightens, but he always leaves space between the lines for the reader to add himself. Suppose for instance the young reader is reading Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings story, The Yearling. Take the episodes leading to the death of Old Slewfoot, the bear. How does the writer increase suspense in that episode and how does each child respond to these elements of suspense intended by the writer? We want every child to see that no event in a plot, however realistic the vein of the writing, is ever presented so completely that he is prevented from adding his own imaginative detail. Children ought to be encouraged to think of themselves as eye witnesses right there on the spot as the action unfolds. The important question is how did the writer try to make an impact and how did each reader respond.

This kind of invited responsiveness needs to be encouraged to be conducted with maximum support. It is essential that we encourage a variety of images each different, yet true to the spirit of the writing. If each child believes that he must give a response exactly paralleling his neighbors, then his attraction to effective reading in literature will be limited. Each child must feel the privilege and proprietary interest in giving his own sketches out of the invitations of the story.

Finally the child is ready to rise to the third level where he is invited to ask "why" the events happened as they did. I think he needs to earn that right, -- he needs to realize, in the root sense of that word, how the story was intended to move before he asks why the story moved as it did. But now let us assume that he has earned that right. He now asks why. Why were these

events selected? Why were they ordered in the way that they were? Now obviously the extent to which these critical responses can be carried varies with the maturity of the reader. But I should hold that it ought to be begun with the very young as they read stories well devised for their maturity. Of course we must not carry it too far. We must not cross-examine. We must conduct our discussions wisely, warmly, economically. But we must do it for I do not believe that appreciation grows unless the young reader is led to know the potentialities there.

Now a brief illustration of teaching children to respond to the literary satisfactions to be found in character development within stories. Again present reading instruction provides the children with a sense of what the character is. So we move to the second level. How is the character communicated? Through his talk, his action, his thought, his feeling, through the other characters and their talk, action or reaction, their thoughts, their feelings? Or how is the character communicated by the author. And then we turn to the other side, to the reader's, the individual reader's responses, and ask how does the reader visualize the character physically, visualize him psychologically, and sometimes in the more mature children's literature, visualize him symbolically.

Suppose we think again for a moment of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' The Yearling. How does the writer have Jody talk? Remember when Jody found the fawn? Remember how he spoke to his father, "Pa, he wa'nt scared of me. He were laying up right where his Mammy had made his bed." We call the attention of the children to how the writer had Jody talk and we ask individual children how that way of talking helped each get his own picture

of Jody. How does the writer show Jody's feelings? Remember the exhausting chase of Old Slewfoot? Remember how the writer reported the effect of the chase on Jody. "Then Penny threw himself on the ground in the sunlight. He lay on his back without speaking. His eyes were closed. Jody laid down beside him. Here was not the joy of the chase, the careless pitting of man's brain against creatures speed and cunning. This was hate and revenge. There was no happiness in it." Again we discuss with children how the writer tried to show Jody's thoughts and feelings and we check individual children to see how each used this literary craft of the writer to add to his own estimation of Jody's character. Similarly the relationship between Jody and his father offers vivid insights into the boy's traits of character. We enjoy with the children the skill of the writer in showing how the relationship is used to add dimension to the boy, and we share among ourselves our own individual creative additions to what the writer has suggested.

John Ciardi once said "A good novelist does not tell us that a given character is good or bad. He shows us the character in action and then, watching, we know." It is up to us to help the children watch as they read. It is up to us to help the theater of the mind grow in richness of reportory witnessing good characters well projected.

Finally we come to the third level in encouraging literary responses to character development. Why is the character represented as he is? Why did the writer have Jody talk as he did? Why did the writer have Jody think and feel as he did? We open our discussion both ways. We try to help the child empathize with the writer to see why the writer made the choices he did. Then we encourage each child to make his own estimate of the writer's success or lack of it.

I hope none of this sounds mechanical or unduly analytical. I am confident a skillful teacher can conduct this kind of discussion and add new joy to reading literature. I am confident a good teacher will maintain a sense of proportion. I am confident a good teacher will not over-guide. I am confident a good teacher will not dwell on the obvious. We all want to get to the appreciative responses for children as quickly and as spontaneously as we can.

Now in less detail I should like to review improving the reading of poetry. We do not need to belabor the point that of course poetry is not a skill-building exercise. That is why basic readers for many years have had only a modest proportion of poetry. Poetry may touch a transient feeling or probe lasting emotion, capture whimsy, or illuminate idea. But poetry must have freedom to live before it can communicate at all. I need not tell you how hard it is for many children to grant the boon of life to poetry. Only if children can see that poetry really can speak to their feelings will better reading in this literary form begin to be possible.

If there is much fine poetry, why are there so many problems in teaching the reading of poetry? Some problems, I think, arise out of unwise selection. For boys particularly much poetry has been offered without robust quality. It is too delicate. We need to avoid that error. Poems for boys need to be sturdy. Any boy must be able to read a poem and still feel all boy. At the same time we need to take care to see that poems are welcomed by the girls, but here choices of poems have always been much more adequate.

But even given appropriate content, poetry is not so easy to read as prose, and we must all face that fact honestly. Poetry is more difficult

to read because of the distinctive demands its literary form imposes. For example a poetic form seeks rhythm and metrical pattern. To achieve cadence, the normal order of words may be dislocated, but in English dislocating normalcy in word order means distrubing a fundamental mechanism of the language. For English is a relatively uninflected language. The language does not often change the form of a word to show a change in the function of the word. In Latin I say "amo puell am", I love a girl. By the ending am, I show who gets love. The order of the words does not matter. I can say "Puellam amo" or "Amo puellam". The meaning is unchanged. But in English the order of words does matter. In English it makes a difference whether I say "The boy chased the teacher" or "The teacher chased the boy". It makes a difference to the teacher. The form of the words in both sentences remains unchanged but the order of words being changed, the meaning is changed. Poetry, I say, often violates normalcy in word order in order to achieve rhythm or meter or, if the poem employs rhyme, to maintain a rhyme scheme. The rearranging of words for these reasons adds distinctive pleasure to those who know poetry. But to the child trying to learn to read poetry real difficulties arise. We need to face those difficulties directly showing children how the statement would have been made usually and why it was made that way.

The demands of rhythm and rhyme mean also that the usual arrangement of statements on the page is abandoned. The statement is chopped into pieces with only half an eye on meaning. The rest of the attention is on cadence. Children are accustomed to seeing sentences beginning with a capital letter and ending with a space. So the lines of a poem appear as a series of separate

statements. This feeling of separateness is, of course, reinforced by the rhythm which brings some sense of ending to each line. Rhyme, when it is present, also reinforces that feeling of finality at the end of the line. But in order to join meaning, the feeling of ending with each line must often be resisted to some extent. The feeling of ending must not be destroyed for that is part of the appeal of the poetic form; still the sense of liaison with the next line must be maintained where meaning demands it. It is a nice balance between ending and not ending which only repeated experience with poetry can bring.

Both the difficulties of word order and spatial arrangement are compounded by compactness in the poetic form. Poetry is the most succinct form of all literary statement. The reader must be alive to this terseness, this compression, this economy from the beginning. Somewhat as in mathematical statements, the child cannot gradually ease himself into understanding. Furthermore, because of poetry's tightly woven statement, he must be prepared to hear the text a number of times. He must learn to live with poetry a while.

Choice of words is, of course, important in all literature, but it is especially critical in poetry. A poet does not want a child to have ready-made responses to what he intends to say. He wants to force the child to create a new response to the word at that very moment which he had never thought of before. So he may use familiar words in an unfamiliar way, or unfamiliar words in a special way, to get this surprise, this shock, this necessity to make a creative response.

We said earlier that all literature communicates by indirection, by allusion, by suggestion. Poetry exemplifies this quality, of course, most

highly of all literary forms. For example, poetry relies heavily on the figurative. Comfortable talk among friends, teachers, and children can grow pleasure in this kind of comparison. How would the statement ordinarily have been made and how does the comparison add illumination and heighten awareness to the ordinary statement? How do individual children see the comparison in their own special private theater of the mind? I want to emphasize that this must be easy non-coercive talk. It must be warm and supportive. It must, to repeat, be "comfortable" talk.

I believe the key to reading poetry with increasing satisfaction resides in its continuing presence. Poetry needs to be always at hand, used at the right moments by a sensitive teacher so that it becomes as natural and normal and attractive as the teacher herself. Keats once said, "If poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree it had better not come at all." Indeed I know of only one sure way to enhance the reading of poetry and that is for you to take the time to read aloud all poetry when it is first presented and to talk about it comfortably afterwards. I know today's tremendous teaching burdens. I know that is asking a good deal indeed, yet I know also the only prayer of securing more effective reading of poetry requires just exactly that: good reading aloud and comfortable talk. All anyone can ask is that you do what you can. Among other things I want you to survive the year.

So I leave poetry. I believe its reading can be improved if we will face the difficulties squarely. The improvement will not come easily but come it will, if we care enough.

I began by asking "What has happened to children's literature?". I hope that I have indicated that nothing has happened to children's literature which a little sustained attention will not repair. If we would just go beyond the basic reading skill emphasis to permit children the great joy which is resident in literature, we should have accomplished a good deal indeed. Selma Lanes in her book, Down The Rabbit Hole, quotes Willa Cather, "Literature must leave in the mind of the sensitive reader an intangible residual of pleasure, a cadence, a quality of the voice that is exclusively the writer's own individual, unique. A quality that one can remember without the volume at hand, can experience over and over again in the mind but can never absolutely define, as one can experience in memory a melody or the summer perfume of a garden."

Should we not leave melody in the memory of children? Should we not leave with children the summer perfume which will linger long after they have left our classrooms? Should we not leave with children the vast 'residual of pleasure' which eternally awaits in children's literature.